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# How Acquisition Training Has Changed Since We Were Certified

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When the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) was enacted in the early 1990s, we both had many years of acquisition experience as federal employees. In the early days of DAWIA, many people, especially those with at least 5-10 years of experience, were “grandfathered” into their career field through the fulfillment process. Basically, we provided justification as to why we already had the requisite knowledge for our respective career field, got our justification approved, and received our Level III certifications. Many others got their DAWIA certifications by taking just a few courses. These courses were typically “death by viewgraph” and involved minimal student participation. The only requirement for graduation was to attend class. Over the years, not only have the certification requirements become more rigorous, the classes have also evolved.

## Why Write This Article?

This article is a follow-up to “Acquisition Training: A Lifelong Process” (*Defense AT&L* May-June 2010). We intend to focus primarily on explaining today’s level of material coverage, level of participation, and level of testable knowledge in DAU acquisition and program management courses. We will describe how the courses have changed over time and discuss the need to view these courses as an essential part of career development. We will also address the importance of appropriate timing of courses, with less demand from the workplace during training, and an

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overall emphasis on ensuring the workforce is getting the training when it is needed.

Additionally, we will discuss the need for workforce members who received their DAWIA certifications many years ago, to keep current with the latest changes in defense acquisition. Having received our initial DAWIA certifications through “grandfathering” and courses taken years ago, we have seen first-hand how fast the acquisition system has changed, and how difficult it is to stay current. This point was driven home in the training we received to become qualified instructors at DAU (the subject of our earlier article). Although there are requirements to participate in continuous learning; until recently, nothing mandated what those courses must be to keep the certification up-to-date. Section 874 of the FY2011 National Defense Authorization Act now mandates the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics establish new requirements for continuing education and periodic renewal of an individual’s certification. With this congressional mandate, we want to encourage the previously-certified acquisition workforce to take refresher training commensurate with their experience level and job related needs.

### How Are the Courses Different?

Before discussing the courses available, it’s important to understand how the courses have changed. Today’s courses are more dynamic and focused, requiring more interaction between the students. Many of the courses are designed to model an integrated product team (IPT), with the students alternating roles on the IPT throughout the course. Most courses now have open or closed book exams, and the students are required to demonstrate a level of mastery of the material to pass. It is important to realize that not all students pass their courses. The reasons are varied but success can be aided by ensuring students meet the prerequisites for each class and, most importantly, have the appropriate acquisition experience prior to attending the course (i.e., do not attempt to take the higher level classes, such as 300-level, with only 6 months of acquisition experience).

Courses are now created with greater levels of participation and “doing,” vice listening to lectures and reading viewgraphs. Students are instructed on the major points of a focus area and given a problem to solve. They then have breakout sessions with their IPT and, working collectively together, are asked to develop a solution and

then present that solution and supporting rationale to the class. This construct is one of the drivers in why having the appropriate level of experience is essential; without it, the students have difficulty making significant contributions during the team exercises or miss the relevance to their job assignments.

Interactions within the group, with other classroom IPTs, and with the instructors also greatly increase students' retention of the material. By having the IPT give a formal presentation to the class, students have even more of an opportunity to retain the material. As shown in Figure 1, retention factors are greatly increased with additional participation and "doing" exercises in the classroom.

Working as IPTs allows the students to participate in a smaller setting within the classroom. During this time, they work on consensus-building by developing an answer to the exercise that they, as a group, can support. In addition, they learn the concept of synergy more by working in their groups than if they performed the exercise individually. While some students have trouble transitioning to this type of learning environment, this approach provides them with an increased opportunity to hone the skills needed for successful program management.

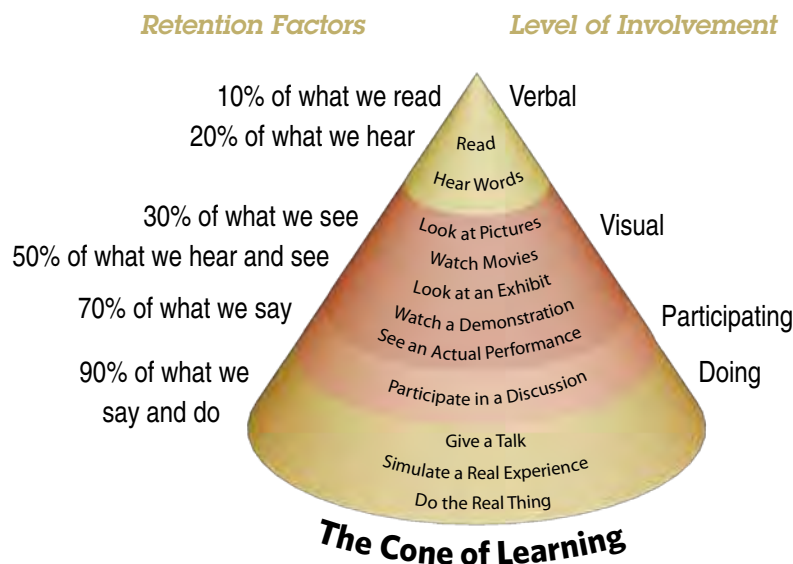
## Second Time Around

We have conducted several interviews with acquaintances and former coworkers we have recently seen in the classroom. Each person we interviewed received his or her initial DAWIA certification through "grandfathering" or courses taken nearly 20 years ago. Each person is now retaking courses for additional certifications or refresher training. We were interested in understanding how they perceived the changes—for the good or otherwise. As we discussed their experiences in the classroom, we noted very similar comments. Each viewed the changes in the material, the teamwork required, the emphasis on student-led learning, and the amount of testing required as changes for the good. However, another common theme was they did not believe enough information was flowing to supervisors and team leaders with respect to the current course demands and increased importance of sending students at the proper time.

## The Right Time for Training

So when is the right time? The maximum benefit can be achieved when the student has the time to devote their undivided attention to the course, and when their experience level is consistent with the course being taken. Unfortunately for many students, the benefits of training can be diminished because they have either "too little time" or "too little experience" when coming to class.

**Figure 1. The Cone of Learning**



Source: Adapted from the National Training Laboratory

**Too Little Time:** Many students come to class expecting to keep up with their current workload while attending class. After all, with smart phones and other wireless devices it's easy to stay connected to the office 24/7. While we recognize that workplace demands don't stop, they can be a significant distraction for students. As we have discussed, the construct of today's classes require a greater level of participation. With students doing team exercises, briefings, and reviewing material covered in student-led instructional periods, some students just cannot grasp the material if they are distracted with work from outside the classroom. These outside distractions have a negative effect on the learning outcome and can result in academic failure. When in class, training needs to take priority over outside work.

**Too Little Experience:** Other students come to class too soon in their acquisition career. This results in students either learning information before it is needed or not being able to contribute because of lack of experience. This is no different than taking a course without the correct prerequisites. As engineering students, we both remember taking calculus-based physics while taking calculus. Sitting in our physics class, we would start working a problem which suddenly became impossible for us to complete without the prerequisite knowledge of calculus. We see students today taking 200-level classes who graduated from college less than 6 months ago. We have students in 300-level courses without the experience normally required to take the course. Most career fields require 2 years of acquisition experience for Level II certification and 4 years of acquisition experience for Level III certification.

While we understand the desire to complete DAWIA training as soon as possible, we find that students often don't realize how much their experience contributes to the overall learning

outcome. Many of today's classes rely on students sharing their experiences to help make the link between an academic solution and real world application. Further, we find that students have difficulty comprehending the material when they cannot relate it to something they have experienced. Even if they do comprehend the material, if it doesn't relate to what they are currently doing, it may be forgotten by the time it's needed. Taking 200-level and 300-level courses without the required experience is in advance of need and in most cases will not result in a positive learning experience for the student. To help determine the appropriate background and experience for a course, DAU's iCatalog contains course descriptions (including target audience) and core certification standards for each career field. Using the iCatalog as a guide, supervisors and employees can schedule training when it will provide the most benefit to the employee and the organization.

### What Training Is Available?

If you received your certification years ago, you may not be aware of all the training resources currently available. Do you have an iPhone or iPad? If so, do you know you can access videos on a variety of acquisition topics from iTunes University? This is just one example of new training resources available to the acquisition workforce. But let's start with the core certification classes.

Most career fields start with basic 100-level courses taught online. The value of these courses is dependent upon the adult learner working to understand and master the material. These online courses have instructors available to answer questions and work with students having trouble understanding the material. As students progress to 200- and 300-level training, the courses tend to have both online and classroom segments. The online portion provides the foundational knowledge while the classroom portion provides application from an IPT perspective. We highly encourage students to complete the classroom portion within 6 months of completing the online portion. After more than 6 months, we have found that students either don't retain the depth of the knowledge required to work the exercises, or are not current with the latest acquisition laws, regulations, and policies. Students in the acquisition/program management career field may progress to 400-level training. These courses are classroom only and are focused on strengthening the analytical, critical thinking and decision-making skills of current/future program managers.

Continuous learning courses are available online and are targeted on topics of interest in specific areas. These courses can be as short as an hour to several days in length. Continuous learning courses can be used to earn continuous learning points as part of the 80 hours required every 2 years. To use these courses for continuous learning fulfillment, the student must take the course for credit. This translates to the student having to take every module and passing every test. Continuous learning courses can also be used as a reference. Let's

say you are coming up for a major technical review on your program and you haven't participated in one for a long time. You can browse the "Technical Reviews" continuous learning course (CLE 003) as a way to refresh your knowledge on the latest changes dealing with technical reviews. If you want to just browse a specific continuous learning course, you're not required to take the tests or read every module in the course. Just read what you want to learn! You must realize, though, this method does not allow you to earn continuous learning credits.

Rapid deployment training is available for organizations, and includes topics such as the Weapon System Acquisition Reform Act, DoDI 5000.02, and the Joint Capability Integration and Development System. As experienced acquisition professionals, these are topics you should know and understand, but you often don't have the time to read all the details to stay fully informed. Rapid deployment training is developed concurrently with new acquisition laws, regulations, and policies, with the intent of providing the workforce with immediate critical information.

Targeted training is also available, and includes a wide range of business, contracting, program management, engineering, logistics, and professional development topics. These classes are intended to fulfill the specific training needs of an organization. Let's say your program is getting ready for Milestone A and the program team wants training on how to write a good Systems Engineering Plan. The program team may consider taking "TTE 005 Systems Engineering Plan" targeting training course to fulfill the need. If your program is getting ready for a source selection, then "TTC 005 Source Selection" may be a course to consider. In addition to these "off the shelf" courses, other targeted training courses can be developed to meet the unique training needs of your organization.

### Conclusion

Much has changed since the early days of DAWIA training. Courses have transitioned from lecture-based learning to more interactive, exercise-based learning where students must demonstrate critical thinking skills to solve acquisition problems. These changes drive an increased need for students to come to class fully prepared and ready to engage. Other changes include the expansion of available formats. Students can now download podcasts or take continuous learning modules anytime, anywhere there is an Internet connection. Rapid deployment training and targeted training opportunities are also available to keep organizations current with the latest process changes and to meet organization specific training needs. Even if you already have your required certifications, we encourage you to take advantage of the new training opportunities available. It's always nice to have a highly experienced acquisition professional in class to share lessons learned and best practices.

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